

The Poison Of Distrust

By HOWARD FIELDING.

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It may have been about a week since Richard Clavering and Muriel Deane became engaged. Upon a certain evening they sat before a cheerful wood fire at her home, and the man's soul awoke with surprise to a consciousness of peace.

For nearly a year he had been in a state of torment, harassed by the most pressing anxieties, haunted by suspicions which gradually developed into certainties and driven to the very last resources of cunning in sheer self-defense. A business associate, a man whom Clavering had called his best friend from the days of their early youth, had fallen a victim to the money mania of the times and had played some tricks which even the highest financiers with their sleeves full of extra aces might blush to imitate. His aim had been a large property of which Clavering was trustee, and he had very nearly stolen it in such a way as would have buried Clavering under a load of debt and dishonor from which he could never have hoped to emerge.

This battle was over, but there was a scar of it on every nerve in Clavering's body. His victory had brought no sense of triumph to him, but only horror and a sad loss of faith in human nature. He had a tendency to think that everything which was said



"DID MISS DEANE MENTION CURTIS MORTIMER?"

to him was a lie and that the simplest acts were prompted by treacherous motives.

Even his personal appearance had suffered in the struggle. He was lean and haggard. There was a deep line down the middle of his forehead, and he had lost a part of that peculiar grace of attitude and gesture which had once distinguished him.

In the fright, however, he looked more like himself, and Muriel, who had never seen him before the days of his trouble and therefore could not miss what was gone from him, was deeply sensible of the charm that still remained.

"Do you remember a Miss Winston?" said he. "I met her today. Her father had some business with me, and she came with him to my office."

"I do not remember her," said Muriel.

"She merely met you once at some social affair in Carlingford about two years ago. She said you lived there. I didn't know it."

"Mother and I lived there for a time—not very long. Then we went abroad and on our return came here."

"I have heard that it was a pretty place. Did you like it?"

"Carlingford?" said she. "I liked it so little that I would rather not speak of it."

"You have unpleasant memories?"

"Yes."

The devil that was in Clavering's nerves awoke at this. He could not have told why he wished to know what those unpleasant memories were, but he was conscious of a craving.

"Doubtless you have friends there," said he and knew not why.

"None," said she. "I have forgotten that Carlingford exists. Please do not remind me."

She spoke with an earnestness which was clear enough to Clavering's sharpened wits, although he tried to veil it. What secret lay behind her wish to avoid this subject even in her own thoughts? She had given him always the most charming impression of frankness and good faith. It was that which had won his heart, weary of deceptions and treachery. And yet he now perceived that she had hidden a whole year of her life. It seemed almost like a trick that she should have spoken like herself, so unreservedly, of her romantic school girl dreams, of the attentions she had received abroad, of everything indeed except this single passage, this year at Carlingford. What could have happened there?

He had strength enough to keep such thoughts out of the center of his mind, but he had acquired recently a habit of double thinking. It was becoming nearly impossible for him to avoid this duality of mind. He would listen to what was said to him and automatically invent and hear another statement which always seemed to be the truth. But in Muriel's presence he had rarely done this. Now for the first time her influence was powerless. All through the evening he felt himself impelled to question and amend whatever she said. His peace of mind was gone.

On the following day he met Mr. Winston again, and only with the greatest difficulty could he avoid asking questions about Carlingford. The name of that city hovered upon his lips until it finally obtained utterance, though quite harmlessly.

"Oh, by the way," said Winston, "did Miss Deane ever mention to you a man named Mortimer—Curtis Mortimer? Brilliant, but untrustworthy. He was cutting quite a figure when I was in Carlingford—a handsome young rascal and a great favorite with the ladies. I've often wondered what became of him."

"I don't think Miss Deane knew him," replied Clavering. "She never mentioned him."

"Well, that's odd," said the old gentleman.

He eyed Clavering for a moment and then turned the conversation to another topic.

For more than a week Clavering struggled with his desire to mention Curtis Mortimer's name to Muriel. He had no special question to ask. He merely felt drawn toward the topic as if by some occult attraction. There was a family named Mortimer in their social circle, and the name was therefore common in their conversation. Whenever it was uttered a spring inside of Clavering's mind would work like the mechanism of an alarm clock, and an inward voice would say, "There was a Curtis Mortimer in Carlingford."

One evening he said it aloud. "How did you know that?" asked Muriel in a tone not quite familiar to his ear.

"Mr. Winston mentioned him," replied Clavering, filled with that peculiar terror which the man of wretched nerves feels when they betray him.

"What did he say?"

Clavering repeated the conversation between himself and Winston with such ready accuracy as revealed the fact that it had been often in his mind. Muriel was silent for some moments and then spoke of other matters.

When Clavering left her house that evening he dared not go home and be alone. He was afraid of his own uncontrollable thoughts. He felt no impulse toward any friend. Mere human companionship, with its restraints, was all that he desired. There was a billiard room near by where he had often played. The game was his favorite recreation, and he was very expert. Perhaps he might find some one in the hall whom he knew, but there was only one acquaintance present, and he already had an opponent.

Clavering watched the game for a few minutes, when the proprietor of the room came up to him.

"Would you care to play with a stranger?" said he. "I don't know him, but he's a gentleman all right. And he plays a good game. He was practicing here a little while this afternoon."

Clavering turned toward the stranger, who had come in just behind him, a tall young man, extremely good looking and very carefully dressed. It seemed to Clavering that he remembered having passed the man on the street near Muriel's house.

"Yes," said he, "I'll play."

It appeared that the stranger bore the name of Jones, so far as Clavering could judge by the mumbled introduction of the proprietor, and it presently became evident that his skill had not been overrated. Clavering was no more than his equal in the best of circumstances, and upon this occasion his condition told heavily against him. There is probably no other game which is such a searcher of weaknesses in a man's nervous system.

Clavering lost two games and declined a third. He was so nervous that his knees were shaking when he stooped to take his coat from the rack under the table, where it lay folded.

As he began to draw it out he was aware of an object in the breast pocket which seemed unfamiliar, a large envelope containing something hard. This he pulled out of the envelope to see what it was and beheld a familiar photograph of Muriel Deane.

He was still stooping under the end of the table. The stranger had gone to the corner of the room where cigars were sold. A great battle raged in Clavering's mind, and he lost. He positively could not help taking the envelope partly from the pocket that he might see the address. The envelope was torn. Clavering saw only the name Carlingford and the state in Muriel's hand.

Shame rushed upon him. He thrust back the envelope and rose.

"Those are my things there," said the stranger, approaching. "Yours are at the other end of the table."

"Yes," said Clavering. "So I perceive."

He walked the streets all night, a prey to the most absurd confusion of thought. His mind wheeled about like a bird and returned always to one central spot. Muriel had lied to him. She had told him that she had no friends in Carlingford and that she had severed all relations with the town and its inhabitants, but she had sent her latest photograph to the man who

called himself Jones in Carlingford.

"Jones" might be Curtis Mortimer or he might not. So much as he had seen on the envelope was far more suggestive of Mortimer than Jones. Certainly there seemed to be an M. But Clavering was quite willing to leave all this aside. He was willing to admit that Muriel might be perfectly within her rights in sending a photograph of herself to Curtis Mortimer, rascal though he was. He said to himself that he must refuse to entertain a doubt of Muriel's ability to explain her conduct in a manner which would be satisfactory to the most censorious critic, the most jealous worshiper.

But this he knew—that if he should again become involved in any maze of falsehood which should destroy his faith in some one whom he loved and trusted he must go mad and die. There was no strength in him for such an ordeal.

"Muriel might better shoot me than lie to me," he repeated frantically aloud in the empty streets.

At dawn he stood upon a height that overlooked the town. The eastern sky blazed with color, and he had no pleasure in it, he to whom the face of nature had once been a perpetual joy. He laughed bitterly.

"Even the sunrise is wrong," he said. "It's not what it used to be. The world and its blue ceiling are ashes, and I have just found it out. Let me think this over. There is something in it."

In the middle of the afternoon he called upon Muriel. The gentleman with whom he had played billiards on the previous evening was just leaving. A moment later they were alone.

"Muriel," said he, "has my conduct vexed you?"

"No," said she.

"But I know that it has," he protested gently. "I have seen it very clearly."

"You are mistaken."

"I have worried you about Carlingford and your life there. Surely I have."

"No," said she, "not in the least."

"You would not care to have me behave otherwise? My constant irritable suspicion and fretful questioning are nothing to you?"

"My dear, my dear!" she cried, with sudden tenderness that brought the tears of her eyes. "Do you fancy that I cannot see beneath this veil of conduct? Am I some wretched lawbreaker that I do not know the difference between a man and his acts? I love you. I am too intent upon what you are to waste my time in worry over what you do."

"You have passed through a bitter trial and have saved your goods and your reputation before the world, but have you saved your character? Richard, your friend has robbed you indeed. He has stolen your faith. You must restore the balance of your soul."

"It is true," said he. "I learn it for the second time today. I learned it first from the sunrise. I tested my sight upon it. The face of nature looked as false and hostile to me as any human countenance. Then the fault must be in me."

"All this may be repaired," said she. "You stand where every one of us is always standing, with the depths of the earth below you and the heights of heaven above. You have the power to rise or fall and as far as you choose."

"I know it," he replied, "and I will surely rise, at least to where I stood before. My soul shall drag my body after it, and these nerves of mine shall be as steady as a rock. They know it; they feel it already. You yourself can see it."

"Very clearly," said she, "and I am very happy. I think you may hear about Mr. Mortimer of Carlingford now, though I had resolved not to speak of him to you. I have told you



"MR. JONES?" SAID CLAVERING. "OH, YES!"

that my mother and I have suffered some losses. I did not give you the details. For full details apply to Mr. Mortimer, if you can find him. The police have been unable to do so. The reason why I did not tell you was that I should have had to lay before you another character precisely like that of your friend who tried to defraud you. It seemed to me that the spectacle would not be beneficial, but now it cannot harm you."

"Not in the least," said he. "There are all kinds of men and women, and most of them try to do right a fair share of their time."

"Speaking of nerves," said she after a brief pause. "I think my own would be the better for some good resolves. I have just learned of an odd thing that I did which shows a loose wheel

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in my mental machinery somewhere. I wrote to some photographers in Carlingford to send copies of a certain picture for which I sat while there, and I inclosed to them one of my latest photographs taken here. A member of the firm happened to be coming to this city, and he brought my picture back to me and received the one that I had meant to send."

"Mr. Jones?" said Clavering. "Oh, yes! He trounced me soundly at billiards last evening."

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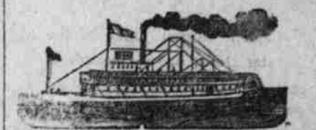
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